



## The pothole problem: how we got here — and the good news about the future

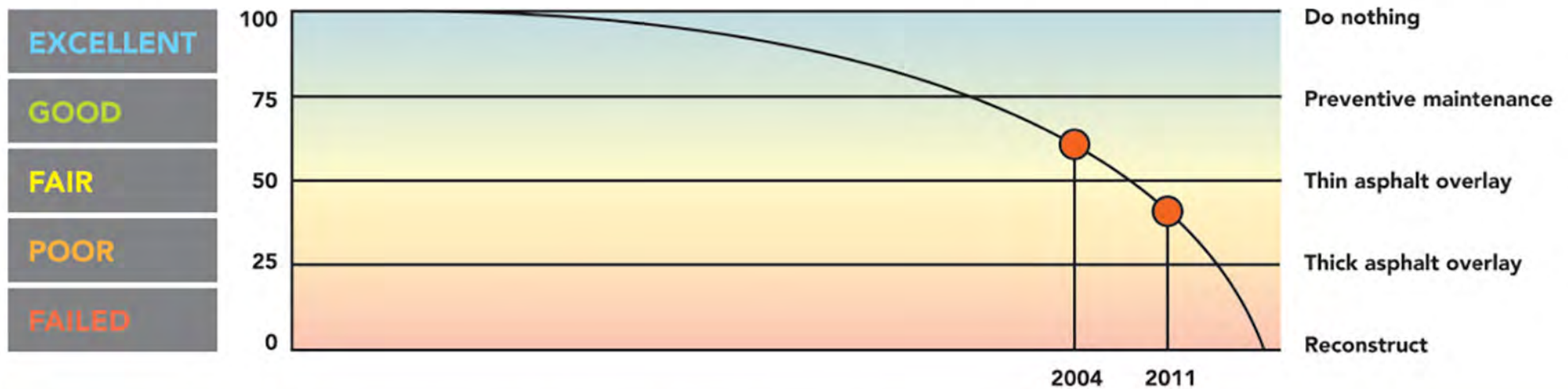




# Pavement Life Cycle

PAVEMENT  
CONDITION  
SCORE

MAINTENANCE  
APPROACH



A Pavement Management report gave Walla Walla an overall rating of 59 (between Fair and Good) in 2004 (see above).

However, the report predicted that if the City could not secure funding for sweeping resurfacing projects, the rating would drop to 29 by 2014, due to the steep deterioration curve expected with asphalt pavement. (An unofficial projection was added in 2011.)

Despite continuous rebuilding projects and repair efforts, this remains a battle that many American cities face, including Walla Walla.

## POTHOLE FACTS vs FICTION

To dispel some common rumors about street work in Walla Walla, here are a few clarifications:

**Walla Walla is worse than everywhere else.**

Former U.S. Secretary of Transportation Ray LaHood says that public spending on infrastructure has fallen to its lowest level since 1947, according to a CBS News report from November 2014. It's clearly a national crisis.

**There seems to be some kind of favoritism in picking which streets to repair.**

The three primary factors are 1) the condition of the street, 2) traffic load, and 3) citizen survey results.

**My property tax and sales tax dollars are being wasted on random street repairs.**

Only two-tenths of one percent of what Walla Wallans and visitors contribute via sales tax is used for efforts like the Rose Street project.

**The budgets are sky-high because the City is careless about money.**

The City aggressively pursues cost-effective solutions, and there's plenty of oversight to make sure they do. People don't realize, for instance, that 20% of the Street Operations budget goes to the electric utilities to power our street lights.





We haven't been talking long when he turns to me and says, "Sometimes I wish I had time to say, 'Hey, have you got a minute? Let me just show you what we're doing here.'"

The man I'm speaking with works on the street maintenance crews of Walla Walla. It's work that can only be done properly within a warmer range of temperatures, and both the materials and the equipment that they use are always much hotter than that. The days are surprisingly long, and just about anyone would describe this line of work as grueling.

But he doesn't mind.

The only part that he doesn't like has more to do with tempers than with temperatures.

Would it surprise you to learn, when we are being directed to slow down—or form a single lane, or drive one block out of our way—how often Walla Walla drivers shout disparaging remarks and make rude gestures at the road crews?

"Some people smile and thank us, but I'm always surprised how many see it the other way," he says, shaking his head.

Taking care of the streets is a complex task.

Viewers of the History Channel's "The Crumbling of America" saw dramatic proof that the street maintenance issues facing Walla Wallans are not unique to our corner of the world. It's clearly a crisis affecting our whole country, and the City of Walla Walla has been proactive in its approach.

But first, it's important to cover some street-maintenance basics:

The costs associated with pavement deterioration over time rise dramatically; the longer you wait to fix them, the worse the problems get. Almost all issues with asphalt stem from water; once water finds a way in, expansion and contraction will start occurring across the seasons as the water freezes and unfreezes.

The movement creates more cracks, and the movement of traffic on cracked asphalt causes it to detach and separate from the pavement around it, until *voilà*: potholes.

For that reason, every street is considered simultaneously from two perspectives: long-term planning and short-term problem-solving. The long-term





monitoring of pavement's life expectancy involves both keeping an eye on the calendar (counting off the years since the last complete rebuilding of the road) and on the availability of funding sources.

The recession of 2008 capped off a decline in traditional funding sources that began in the 1980s, and America's re-paving calendar ground to a halt. This slow-down, in turn, meant that the cost of those repairs—due to the bell-curve of deterioration over time—would increase dramatically.

Completely separate from the acceleration of repair costs due to the predictable decline of roads once they've already been built is the fact that the price of rebar, concrete and asphalt has *doubled* in the last ten years.

The short-term perspective acknowledges that streets will always need superficial repairs before the next major road re-building is required. Cities are obliged to upgrade the utilities that are buried underneath the street once they have the road open, which becomes another substantial cost factor—and that in turn affects how long it takes to secure funding.

Short-term solutions will always be necessary, given the rapid rate at which asphalt deteriorates versus the length of time it takes to fund the rebuilding of roads from scratch. Long-term planning must always be in play as well, as you have to plan years in advance in order to secure funding for the inevitable road-rebuilding projects.

The City of Walla Walla has worked diligently to



*The Zipper scoops a shallow trench at a consistent depth.*

nurture not only external sources of funding for road repairs but also the City's own reserves.

2015 will see a big change in the City's ability to respond to the short-term repairs that can result in smoother rides for Walla Wallans. It has to do with the Zipper, the Road Runner, and the newest piece of the puzzle: Wile E. Coyote. At least, these are the nicknames the street crews have given these particular pieces of equipment.

Now the City is able to use their street crews to repair four-foot-wide strips of damaged pavement, without waiting for funding, without designating each effort as a "project," and without lengthy street closures.

The 1-2-3 punch involves removing the top inch-and-a-half to two inches of asphalt where the deterioration is worst (the Zipper), scooping up the



**The longer you wait to fix them,  
the worse the problems get.**





**"Some people smile and thank us, but I'm always surprised how many see it the other way."**

*Many passersby don't realize that the most complex part of making street improvements is controlling an intersection safely.*



*The custom-made "Wile E. Coyote" is ready to roll.*

reusable ground asphalt (the Road Runner), and laying down new, smooth asphalt moments later (Wile E. Coyote).

"I call it the 'Ride Along' program," says the fellow I'm speaking with. I ask him to explain.

"We're making everyone's ride so much smoother as we move along," he answers with a smile.

Community members can come up with programs of their own, it occurs to me. I ask what he thinks of my brand-new Thumbs Up program.



*The crew is prepared to cover a lot of ground this summer.*

What if, when Walla Wallans drive by a construction site—or when a detour sign makes us drive a block out of our way, or when we have to slow down or change lanes—we roll down our windows and give a thumbs up to the people on the street crew? A quick thank-you for making our ride smoother? How would that be?

He nods and smiles. "That would change a lot."

Consider joining the Thumbs Up program, won't you? A smile wouldn't hurt, either.



# City News Briefs

## GOWALLAWALLA.US SITE

Updates for all the City's street maintenance projects can be found at [gowallawalla.us](http://gowallawalla.us), including an up-to-date counter for potholes as they get filled!

## GENTLEMEN OF THE ROAD STOPOVER TOUR, AUG 13-15

Mumford & Sons' new album *Wilder Mind* debuted at #1 on the Billboard 200 and sales have been the largest of any rock album in nearly a year. Foo Fighters are the Friday night main stage attraction and Mumford & Sons will be the featured Saturday night headliner. Over 15,300 tickets have been sold to date, and all



hotel rooms in the area have been booked since March.

## SPLASHPAD UPDATE

The dedication is scheduled for June 11 at 1:30 at Washington Park.

# City Directory

## ANIMALS

Complaint	(509) 527-1960
Licensing	(509) 525-2452
Lost and Found	(509) 525-1960

## CITY PROJECTS

Project Information	(509) 527-4537
Streets/Potholes	(509) 527-4363

## DEVELOPMENT

Bids & Requests for Proposals	(509) 527-4463
Building & Planning	(509) 524-4710
Building Inspection	(509) 524-4729
Business Licensing	(509) 524-4710

## EMERGENCIES

Call 911

## EMERGENCY SERVICES

(Non-urgent business)	
Ambulance	(509) 527-4606
Fire	(509) 527-4429
Police	(509) 527-4434

## PLAY

Arts Programs	(509) 527-4527
Facility Reservations	(509) 527-4527
Library	(509) 527-4550
Permits, Liquor/ Special Events	(509) 527-4527
Sports Programs	(509) 527-4527

## YOUR HOME

Block Watch	(509) 524-4409
Deck & Fence Permits	(509) 524-4710
Garbage	(509) 527-4479
Irrigation	(509) 527-4380
Landfill	(509) 527-4591
Permits	(509) 524-4710
Sewer Issues	(509) 527-4363
Utility Accounts	(509) 527-4423
Water/Sewer Billing	(509) 527-4423
Water Maintenance	(509) 527-4380

## SUSTAINABILITY

Recycling Billing	(509) 527-4479
Recycling Service	(509) 525-1711
Sanitation	(509) 527-4479
Water Conservation	(509) 527-4380

## City of Walla Walla

### City Council

Jerry Cummins, Mayor  
Chris Plucker, Mayor Pro-Tem  
Jim Barrow  
Barbara Clark  
Mary Lou Jenkins  
Dick Morgan  
Allen Pomraning

### City Hall

15 N. 3rd Avenue  
Walla Walla, WA 99362

### City Departments

*Administration/Support Services*  
15 N. 3rd Avenue  
(509) 527-4540

*Development Services*  
55 E. Moore Street  
(509) 524-4710

*Fire Department*  
200 S. 12th Avenue  
(509) 527-4429

*Parks and Recreation*  
55 E. Moore Street  
(509) 527-4527

*Police Department*  
54 E. Moore Street  
(509) 527-4434

*Public Library*  
238 E. Alder Street  
(509) 527-4550

*Public Works*  
55 E. Moore Street  
(509) 527-4463

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**Social media:** [facebook.com/CityofWallaWalla](https://facebook.com/CityofWallaWalla)

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